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SOCIAL HOUSING IN MANITOBA

Examining the historical impacts of neoliberalism

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Executive Summary

With the global rise of neoliberalism over the past half century, social housing systems in many nations including Canada have eroded, significantly impacting the ability of low-income households to access housing (Ali et al., 2024; Bernas et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2023). In Canada, the federal government devolved responsibility for social housing to the provinces in the 1990s, and provinces have since taken different approaches to addressing low-income housing need (Suttor, 2016). This study examines how neoliberalism is reflected in the approaches to social housing that evolved in Manitoba between 1993 and 2024, and what, if any, conditions may have helped to resist it.

Framed by sociological and political economic theories and using qualitative case study methods, this research includes the development of a detailed timeline of events and contexts relevant to social housing in Manitoba, and an analysis of characteristics associated with the neoliberalization of social housing. These characteristics include devolution; a shift in focus from social to affordable housing; reduced fiscal responsibility; changes to nonprofit housing provider operations and relations with the province; marketization; privatization; increased provision of rental assistance over social unit supply; and increased prioritization of groups with special needs. Findings show extensive and increasing characteristics of neoliberalization in Manitoba's approaches to social housing over the majority of the study time period, contributing to not only the erosion of social housing, but also reduced provincial involvement in its provision, and eroded capacities of both the province and the nonprofit sector to provide it. At the same time, conditions that appear to have helped resist or temper neoliberal approaches include

having a social democratic political party leading government, and the presence of sustained and organized efforts by diverse advocacy groups.

The following actions should be taken to reengage in the expansion of social housing and realize housing rights for all Manitobans:

1. The provincial and federal governments should commit sufficient public resources to expand social housing supply, in both the public and nonprofit sectors, to meet all low-income housing need.
2. The provincial and federal governments should establish long-term, stable, and appropriate funding and programs to support nonprofit housing provider capacities.
3. Neoliberalization processes should be recognized and rejected; housing need is a public issue resulting from neoliberal political, economic, and social policy decisions.

*This report summarizes portions of a Master's thesis entitled *Neoliberalism and Social Housing: Comparing Approaches to Social Housing in Manitoba and British Columbia from 1993 to 2019* (available at <https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/bitstreams/dc410c40-e65d-42eb-b057-cc4a78d189fa/download>), as well as portions of an additional report covering the years 2020–2024 which has been provided to the MRA and Right to Housing Coalition.

Key messages

- Neoliberalism, which centres on individual responsibility and reduced state intervention in social matters, is fundamentally incompatible with the social provision of housing, and its implementation leads to the erosion of social housing and increased housing inequality.
- Approaches to social housing that have evolved in Manitoba since federal devolution of responsibility and cuts to funding for new social housing in the 1990s reflect many characteristics associated with neoliberalization, which have contributed to the erosion of social housing within the province.
- In order to stop this trajectory and realize the right to housing for all Manitobans the provincial and federal governments need to commit sufficient funding, resources, and programs to expand social housing supply and re-capacitate the public and nonprofit sectors.

Introduction

With the rise of neoliberalism in Canada over the last several decades, federal and provincial governments have been withdrawing social resources, with impacts on social housing systems, public and nonprofit sector capacities, and housing equality overall.

Beginning in the 1960s, social housing became a critical part of Canada's welfare state and housing system, and for a significant portion of low-income Canadians, has often been the only means of accessing a secure and consistent place to live (OECD, 2020; Ali et al., 2024; Silver & Brandon, 2015; Bernas et al., 2023). More recently,

Canada's National Housing Strategy acknowledged social housing as necessary for the wellbeing of a significant portion of Canada's population, and its enhancement as critical to addressing housing need (Canada, 2017). Despite this, with the rise of neoliberalism in Canada over the last several decades, federal and provincial governments have been withdrawing social resources, with impacts on social housing systems, public and nonprofit sector capacities, and housing equality overall (Zhu et al., 2023).

In Manitoba, approaches to social housing have largely followed the federal trajectory since responsibility was devolved to the provinces in the early 1990s, and, tied to neoliberalization processes, both public and nonprofit housing have

been affected. Drawing on sociological and political economic theories, this qualitative historical case study examines how neoliberalism is reflected in approaches to social housing that evolved in Manitoba since 1993, and conditions that may have helped to resist it. This research can help policy makers, researchers, and housing advocates better understand current conditions, consequences, future trajectories, and alternatives (Piketty, 2020).

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a political economic ideology and theory holding that the market is the best means for organizing the economy, and that the state should not interfere in social matters through regulation or redistribution (Harvey, 2005; Bourdieu, 2005). Emphasizing individual responsibility, private sector delivery, and minimal government intervention (Chernomas, Hudson, & Hudson, 2019), neoliberalization processes restructure the state and institutions away from welfare state functions like the provision of social housing (Piketty, 2020; Harvey, 2005; Mazzucato, 2024). In many ways neoliberalism is fundamentally incompatible with the social provision of housing, and has eroding effects on social housing systems. Several characteristics associated with social housing neoliberalization contribute to this process:

- **Devolution:** decentralized responsibility for social housing to lower levels of government or civil society results in reduced and/or disbursed capacities to provide it (Glynn, 2009a; Hackworth, 2009; Olanubi & Maes Nino, 2024).
- **Affordable over social housing:** focus on “affordable” housing with higher income thresholds rather than social housing produces less housing for the lowest incomes (Grisé, 2016; Glynn, 2009c).
- **Reduced fiscal responsibility:** defunded programs and unstable residual funding result in fewer low-income units and households receiving supports (Glynn, 2009b).
- **Changes to nonprofit provider relations and operations:** expectations that social providers operate independently, with stricter accountability and less funding stability, result in reduced capacities (Hackworth, 2009; Hackworth & Moriah, 2006; Cooper, 2024).

- **Marketization:** social units increasingly tied to market forces (market-based rent formulas, private financing, etc) introduce market instability into social housing (Glynn, 2009c; Hackworth, 2009; Cooper, 2024).
- **Privatization:** selling or transferring management of social units to the private sector, or relying on private developers to produce low-income housing, redirects public assets to private profits (Glynn, 2009c; Cooper, 2024; Olanubi & Maes Nino, 2024).
- **Rental assistance over social unit provision:** favoring rental subsidies paid to tenants or landlords in private market housing over the provision of social units contributes to fewer low-cost units, precarious private market tenancies, and redirection of public money to the private sector (Cooper, Hajer, & Plaut, 2020; Weselowski, 2014).
- **Prioritization of special needs groups:** prioritizing vulnerable or “most in need” groups (seniors, homeless, disability, mental illness, domestic violence survivors, etc), limits access for those with other needs, and concentrates people with complex requirements in underfunded housing (Ali et al., 2024; Silver, 2011; Zhu et al., 2023)

Methods

Data sources used to develop the timeline of events and contexts relevant to social housing in Manitoba for this qualitative case study included: annual reports by ministries responsible for housing; housing strategies and action plans; federal housing agreements; media and community organization reports; and academic and gray literature. A description-based analysis of this timeline was conducted, focusing on the characteristics of social housing neoliberalization identified above. This process was iterative to ensure a thorough analysis. Though maintenance and repair of existing social units are a critical part of sustaining social housing that has likely been impacted by neoliberalization, due to scope limitations, this study places primary focus on provincial approaches related to the development of new units rather than maintenance.

As used here, “social housing” refers to public- or nonprofit-owned (ie. non-market) rent-geared-to-income housing that “has rents set at less than 30% of household income in perpetuity” (Right to Housing, 2024).

Background

Social housing in Canada

Federal housing policy in Canada has historically focused on middle-class homeownership, with only modest attempts to develop the social housing system (Silver & Brandon, 2015). Following Suttor's (2016) account, federal efforts for social housing prior to 1993 can be summarized as follows:

- 1949–64: First federal programs for public housing, targeting low-income and senior households, created modest levels of federal public units.
- 1965–73: Programs expanded to facilitate provincial development, leading to significant increases in both federal and provincial public units.
- 1974–85: Nonprofit and mixed-income programs expanded, beginning a shift away from public and low-income units. New production peaked in 1980, followed by decline as neoliberalism expanded and provinces struggled to keep up with federal commitments (Rewniak, 1997).
- 1985–93: Management of some federal programs was transferred to provinces, nonprofit and low-income units were prioritized, federal funding stagnated, and production decline continued despite some provinces increasing contributions (British Columbia, 1999).

With an economic recession and neoliberalism rising globally, 1993 marked a drastic turn in Canadian social housing when the federal government eliminated all funding for new social units from its budget. In 1996 its intention to further devolve existing federal units to the provinces was announced (Suttor, 2016), and Social Housing Agreements established federal funding schemes for transferred units (Housing Services Corporation, 2014). In 2001, the federally-led Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI) was announced, providing provincially-matched capital contributions for new private market or nonprofit housing units with below median market rents. While subsequent phases extending the AHI over the next decade did increase provisions for lower-income housing, minimal funds were used to create rent-geared-to-income (RGI) units (Grisé, 2016; Suttor, 2016).

In 2009, the Canada Economic Action Plan created in response to the 2007–2008 recession included federal funding for new social and affordable housing, with allocations specific to seniors, people with disabilities, and on-reserve housing (Suttor, 2016). From 2011–2019 the Investment in Affordable Housing (IAH) replaced the AHI, giving provinces more flexibility to establish affordable rental and homeownership, shelter allowance, and rent supplement programs (Housing Services Corporation, 2014), but again RGI housing was not a priority.

In 2017 the 10-year National Housing Strategy (NHS) was released, including funding for new and updated social/community housing and a new housing benefit program (Canada, 2017). The NHS Act was passed in 2019, NHS bilateral agreements with provinces were signed, and in subsequent years provincial programs were developed to administer provincial and federal NHS contributions. To-date, the NHS has been critiqued for its dearth of funding for long-term, deeply subsidized housing, its reliance on provincial willingness, resources, and capacities to engage (Bernas et al., 2023; Cooper, Hajer, & Plaut, 2020), and its insufficient delivery of housing affordable to households in core housing need (National Housing Council, 2023).

Manitoba case study

Political support for social housing in Manitoba has historically fluctuated (Smith, 2023; Jeannotte, 2010). Though some federally-funded units were produced prior, the provincial government did not establish the Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation (MB Housing) to act as its “delivery arm” for social housing until 1967 (KPMG, 2007, p. 32). Between this and 1975, 10,000 provincial public units were created (Suttor, 2016; Smith, 2023), and by the 1990s the province had developed nearly 18,000 public units, with 13,000 managed by MB Housing, and 5000 by nonprofit or private organizations. Approximately 17,500 federally-funded nonprofit units were also developed, and the province had several modest shelter allowance and rent supplement programs (Manitoba Dept. of Housing, 1994).

1993–1999

In the context of growing neoliberalism, globally and across Canada, Manitoba’s approach to social housing changed drastically between 1993 and 1999. Gary Filmon’s Conservative government had pursued a notably neoliberal agenda since its election in 1988, prioritizing spending cuts and reduced social policy (Sheldrick, 2015; Jeannotte, 2010), and when the federal government withdrew funding for new social housing in 1993 the province followed suit, halting all new social housing expansion (Manitoba Dept. of Housing, 1995). In the years following, the province focused on restructuring Manitoba Housing, and after 1996, on preparing for the devolution of federal units (Manitoba Dept. of Housing, 1998). In

1998, Manitoba signed the Social Housing Agreement (SHA) to establish federal funding for transferred units, which would decline until all operating agreements expired. Nearly 17,500 units were transferred, most nonprofit-owned, doubling the provinces' inventory (Manitoba Dept. of Housing, 1999).

1999–2009

The 1999 election of Gary Doer's New Democratic Party (NDP) initiated another shift in Manitoba. While promising to undo Conservative cuts, the NDP also adopted a "3rd way" approach to appease both the business sector and working-class voters (Frankel & Lavasseur, 2016; Sheldrick, 2015; Camfield, 2018). The Ministry of Housing merged with Family Services, signalling an orientation that connected housing to policies for social stability, and in the following years new focus was placed on increasing capacity and independence of nonprofit housing providers (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 2000).

In 2002, Manitoba signed the Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI) to match federal funding for up to 2,500 new affordable units over five years, through rental, ownership, rehabilitation, and conversion (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 2003). Rents would be set at or below median market rates to achieve affordability goals (CMHC, 2009, p. 77), but RGI-level subsidies were not required. By 2004, 1,900 of the 2,500 units were in progress or completed; however, there was still concern about the shortage of low-income housing. In 2005, the West Central Network and CCPA-MB critiqued the province's choice to direct most AHI funds toward ownership and higher-income rentals, and called for committed targets for low-income units (CCPA-MB, 2005; MacKinnon, 2005). Also noted was the increased reliance on the nonprofit sector without accompanying funding (Institute of Urban Studies, 2006). Though subsequent phases of the AHI did include lower-income household targets (CMHC, 2009), little provincial emphasis on RGI continued.

In 2006, the monthly-rate Manitoba Shelter Benefit replaced previous income-based allowance programs, increasing the number of reported recipients, and the province also renewed emphasis on nonprofit sector independence and efficiency (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 2007). The *HOMEWorks!* provincial housing strategy was released in 2007, focusing investments in "community-driven" expansions of lower-income housing, homeless housing, private housing renovation, and public

housing revitalization (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 2008, p. 5). Though it did promise to increase RGI units, it did not include targets, and the Right to Housing Coalition called the province to address existing need by committing 300 new units annually for five years (MacKinnon, 2007).

2009–2016

In 2009, Doer stepped down and was replaced by Greg Selinger as NDP leader and Premier, and a new Ministry of Housing and Community Development was established to “integrat[e] housing initiatives with other social, economic and community development policies and programs” (Manitoba Housing and Community Development, 2010, p. 5). A commitment of 1,500 new social units within five years was made, and a new homelessness strategy included funding for emergency shelters, dedicated rent supplements, and mental health and social services (Manitoba Housing and Community Development, 2010). Aligning with a new aging strategy, some social buildings could also access health funding for seniors’ services (Manitoba Housing and Community Development, 2012). Coinciding with the Canada Economic Action Plan, these developments marked a significant change in Manitoba, as although targets for new RGI units were set for the first time, the prioritization of homeless and seniors’ programs also gained prominence.

In 2010, the province again increased its focus on homelessness by dedicating Manitoba Housing units to homeless-serving organizations, and in 2011 the Investment in Affordable Housing (IAH) replaced the AHI, giving Manitoba more flexibility in determining investment priorities (Manitoba Housing and Community Development, 2011). In 2012, Manitoba Housing assumed responsibility for homelessness policies and programs (Manitoba Housing and Community Development, 2013), and focus on this sector continued into 2013 (Manitoba Housing and Community Development, 2014).

In 2014 the province announced that its 1,500-unit commitment had been completed through the creation of 790 new rent supplemented affordable units and 710 new RGI units. Advocates were disappointed to learn that most affordable units had median market rather than low rents, and that half the RGI units were created through stacked subsidies rather than new builds (Brandon, 2014). However, a subsequent commitment was made for 500 affordable and 500 RGI units over three years

(Manitoba Housing and Community Development, 2015), and the Rent Assist program was launched to replace previous allowance programs. Under Rent Assist, rent subsidies would be provided directly to tenants, initially based on the difference between 25 percent of household income and a percentage of market rates, and could be used in private market housing (Cooper, Hajer, & Plaut, 2020).

Over the next year, the province continued to encourage self-sufficiency for nonprofit housing providers (Manitoba Housing and Community Development, 2015) but advocates and housing providers remained concerned about expiring operating agreements. While the province did work with the Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association (MNPFA) on strategies to keep low-cost housing viable, the sector's apprehension increased that without renewed provincial agreements, units would be lost (Cooper, 2014; Bernas, 2015). In 2016, Manitoba also initiated the sale of five public housing properties to nonprofit organizations, to increase sector capacity and reduce "provincial budget constraints" (Olanubi and Maes Nino, 2024, p. 15).

While under the NDP from 1999–2016, several shifts can be identified in Manitoba's approach to social housing: initial emphasis centered on increasing nonprofit provider independence, and after the implementation of the AHI, new affordable units were prioritized over RGI units. After 2009, recognition and advocacy prompted targets for new RGI units, however focus on homelessness, mental illness, and seniors grew, and rental assistance became increasingly central in addressing the needs of these groups.

2016–2023

The 2016 provincial election initiated the most significant shift in Manitoba's social housing approach yet, this time under Brian Pallister's Progressive Conservatives (PCs) who quickly implemented a decidedly neoliberal austerity agenda. Responsibility for housing was subsumed under the Ministry of Families (Manitoba Families, 2017), reflecting a diminished importance. The following year a public spending review recommended a social housing "business transformation", which included the devolution of provincial housing assets, retention of public units for only very vulnerable households, and the increased use of private market rent supplements to address housing need (KPMG, 2017, p. 63–64). Despite community opposition (Olanubi and Maes Nino, 2024; Silver,

2017), from 2017–2018 the province sold 946 public properties, and 38 nonprofit operating agreements expired (Manitoba Families, 2018; 2019). These losses are juxtaposed against only 237 new affordable housing units (some for ownership) and no social/RGI units being created by the province from 2016–2018 (MacKinnon, 2020). Additionally, in 2018 Manitoba increased the Rent Assist amount from 25 to 30 percent of income and changed eligibility requirements, and though the program continued to be central to the province's housing efforts, the changes resulted in reduced eligibility and benefit levels (Manitoba Families, 2018; McCracken, 2018). Focus also remained on delivering funding to homeless-serving organizations, emergency shelters, and other rent supplement programs for priority groups (Manitoba Families, 2019).

In June 2019, Manitoba signed the National Housing Strategy bilateral agreement, consisting of two cost-matched funding streams: the Manitoba Priorities Initiative for affordable for-profit, ownership, or nonprofit development; and the Canada Community Housing Initiative for public, nonprofit, co-op, or Indigenous housing (Manitoba Families, 2020). Funds could be used to increase or preserve unit supply, rental assistance programs, or ownership opportunities (CMHC, 2019). When Manitoba Housing issued its first NHS Action Plan, however, it confirmed its intention to pursue devolution despite acknowledging that the NHS was “an opportunity to preserve and expand social and affordable housing” (Manitoba Housing, 2020, p. 6). The plan also reiterated the importance of rental assistance, private market housing, and prioritizing the “most vulnerable” in Manitoba's future plans (Manitoba Housing, 2020).

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted housing operations and services. The province deployed \$23 million in funding for special Rent Relief and tenancy support programs, municipal grants, and to facilitate public health directives (Manitoba Families, 2021). \$4.5 million was again distributed in 2021 to address pandemic conditions, but the province continued to prepare for “sector transformation” (Manitoba Families, 2022, p. 112). The NHS Canada-Manitoba Housing Benefit (CMHB) was also launched with streams for youth exiting care, homelessness, and mental health/addictions (CMHC, 2020), and the Rent Relief program was continued (Manitoba Families, 2022). Later in the year Pallister stepped down and was replaced by Heather Stefanson as Premier.

In 2022, the next NHS Action Plan confirmed that 12 percent of Manitoba Housing's portfolio (1,511 units) had been transferred to nonprofit management. It also stated that “vulnerable applicants, such as those who are homeless or experiencing domestic violence” would

have priority in MB Housing units (Manitoba Housing, 2022, p. 4). The number of households receiving housing supports dropped by 4,650 by the following year (Manitoba Families, 2022, p 110; 2023, p. 122) due to expired operating agreements with private and nonprofit operators (Manitoba Families, 2023, p. 143), in contrast to only 251 affordable homes added (Manitoba Families, 2023). The next NHS Action Plan released in 2023 reflected similar priorities overall, but there were a few positive commitments: 11,962 “community housing” units with expired or expiring operating agreements would be preserved to meet NHS targets; and the CMHB would see increased benefit levels for the homeless and mental health/addiction streams, increased age and time limits for the youth stream, and an added stream for people leaving gender-based violence (Manitoba Housing, 2023)

In mid-2023, MNPHA published a *Community Housing Needs Assessment for Manitoba*, demonstrating significant unmet need in the province (Courtney, 2023). The Right to Housing Coalition followed with a *Social Housing Action Plan for Manitoba* calling on the province to add 1,000 RGI units annually for the next 10 years, through new construction rather than private market subsidies (Bernas et al., 2023). Shortly after, a provincial election was called and Wab Kinew’s NDP replaced the PCs. During their tenure, the PC government had pursued distinctly neoliberal policies, focusing almost exclusively on withdrawing from social housing through devolution and privatization, expanding rental assistance and private market development, and a nearly complete lack of investment in new social units.

2023–2024

Following the NDP’s election, a new Department of Housing, Addictions, and Homelessness was created to tie housing directly to homelessness policy, and funding to enhance tenancy support programs and maintain 372 RGI units with expiring operating agreements was announced (Manitoba Housing, Addictions and Homelessness, 2024). The following year the province introduced a new nonprofit funding model to preserve agreements for an additional 2,431 units (Manitoba Housing, Addictions and Homelessness, 2025), and, potentially signalling renewed emphasis on RGI, annual reports for 2023 and 2024 included a new RGI-based definition for social housing (Manitoba Housing, Addictions and Homelessness, 2024, p. 88; 2025, p. 86).

Near the end of the 2024/25 fiscal year, the *Your Way Home* plan to end chronic homelessness was released, with provincial commitments to providing 700 people in encampments with housing and supports by either purchasing new units, or by transitioning “tenants who are best positioned to succeed outside of MB Housing” to subsidized private market units (Manitoba, 2025, p. 7). A final NHS Action Plan was also issued, with commitments for 1,029 new units of social and affordable housing to be prioritized for people experiencing homelessness, encampment dwellers, and survivors of gender-based violence. Concerningly, the Plan also relayed that new applications for CMHB were paused in March 2025 due to the exhaustion of federal funds (Manitoba Housing, 2025).

During these final years under the NDP, emphasis on RGI housing and the preservation of both public and nonprofit operating agreements appear to reflect more dedication to social housing than past governments. Despite this, the stability and capacity of Manitoba’s social housing sector after the current federal NHS commitments end in the coming years remain to be seen.

Analysis

The implementation of neoliberalism in Manitoba is associated with a decrease in provincial involvement in social housing and an increased decapacitation of both the province and nonprofit sectors, contributing to the erosion of social housing.

From 1993–2024, the Manitoba case study shows extensive and increasing characteristics of neoliberalization in the province's approach to social housing. Provincial responsibility to ensure housing for low-income households diminished, approaches were reoriented toward private market subsidization and provision, and the nonprofit sector which has historically relied on state funding, expertise, and coordination was significantly impacted. As a result, the implementation of neoliberalism in Manitoba is associated with a decrease in provincial involvement in social housing and an increased decapacitation of both the province and nonprofit sectors, contributing to the erosion of social housing. To further articulate this assessment, the following analysis examines the case study in relation to each of the characteristics of social housing neoliberalization.

- **Devolution:** In response to federal devolution in the 1990s, Manitoba halted all social housing expansion.

When the federal government reengaged in affordable housing in the 2000s, almost exclusive provincial focus was on nonprofit and private delivery (Institute of Urban Studies, 2006; Suttor 2016), and later in the study period, neoliberal narratives portraying social housing as unsustainable supported transfers of public assets and management. While devolution can facilitate flexibility and autonomy for housing providers, in the context of neoliberal austerity it also results in less resources and funding (Desroches and Poland, 2023; Suttor, 2016). As part of the neoliberalization process, devolution has clear, ongoing implications for the stability and maintenance of social housing, as demonstrated by the Manitoba case.

- **Affordable over social housing:** Manitoba shows a strong shift toward favoring affordable over social housing for most of the study period. Starting in the early 2000s, federal AHI/IAH programs set a clear precedent for the later lack of RGI focus under the NHS. While deeply subsidized housing could be developed by the province under these programs, little was (with some exceptions between 2009–2014, and again after 2023) (CCPA-MB, 2005; MacKinnon, 2005; Bernas et al., 2023). This shift suits neoliberalization efforts; affordable housing is more closely integrated with the market, requires less investment, and, with higher profits, is more appealing to private developers. It does little, however, to address demand (and need) for low-cost housing. This shift is further evidence of the eroding effects that neoliberalization has had on social housing in Manitoba.
- **Reduced fiscal responsibility:** The initial halt to provincial funding, the limited number of units produced after the 2000s reengagement, and the subsequent favouring of lower subsidy affordable units over RGI units demonstrate a decrease in Manitoba's fiscal responsibility since the 1990s. Manitoba relinquished its responsibility for supporting households in need, and the social housing sector overall, with significant consequences: when new units are not produced, no units replace those that deteriorate or age-out of operating agreements, and fewer are available for households in need (Glynn, 2009b). These policy choices demonstrate Manitoba's definitive shift toward neoliberal nonintervention and provincial withdrawal from financial responsibility.
- **Changes to nonprofit provider relations and operations:** Increasing provincial expectations that nonprofit providers become self-sustaining and business-oriented have impacted how they interact

with the province. Expiring operating agreements and reduced funding have also affected nonprofit operations, requiring some providers to change service mandates, rent structures, or eliminate RGI altogether (Cooper, 2019; 2024). Though nonprofit housing providers remain an integral part of Manitoba's social housing system, they are experiencing unprecedented challenges. While some organizations have had the resources to remain afloat in the face of neoliberal funding cuts and reduced provincial involvement, others have not, and social units have been lost.

- **Marketization:** With destabilized and diminished government funding, many nonprofit operators have had to adopt market-oriented practices, such as charging market rents or borrowing privately (Cooper, 2024; 2025). The province itself has also increased marketization through its re-orientation toward affordable housing tied to market rates instead of social housing based on tenant incomes, and toward funding models requiring nonprofit providers to compete with for-profit developers. By design, social housing is intended to operate outside of market forces, and to tie social housing to the market in these ways defeats its intended purpose and has ultimately served to erode it.
- **Privatization:** Demonstrating a move toward privatization, asset sales and management transfers have been pursued in Manitoba, most prominently between 2017–2023 (Olanubi and Maes Nino, 2024). While privatization has been portrayed as financially necessary, it

can be more accurately interpreted as neoliberal withdrawal from social welfare; public assets have been lost, democratic involvement in housing policy has eroded, and low-income households have been put at greater risk in a market that has historically not provided housing affordable to them. And, as Smith (2020) suggests, Manitoba's history of social housing development is itself a valuable provincial capacity that has also been lost with privatization.

- **Rental assistance over social unit provision:** The case study shows an

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increased emphasis on rental assistance policies and decreased focus on new social units through the study period. Though Manitoba has historically had modest allowances and supplement programs, since 2014 Rent Assist has become an increasingly central means through which households receive provincial support, particularly in private market housing, but without RGI levels of subsidy. Though this is a means through which many households receive assistance, rates have been insufficient to bridge incomes and housing costs (Cooper, Hajer, & Plaut, 2020), and private market rental assistance programs in general do not “address the underlying causes of unaffordability” (BCNPHA, 2009). They also fail to protect tenants from market instabilities, making them an inadequate substitute for true social housing in Manitoba.

- **Prioritization of special needs groups:** This practice has become prominent in Manitoba, particularly in relation to homeless groups. MB Housing has increasingly focused on supporting emergency shelters and homeless-serving organizations, and concentrated public units, funding, and staff resources on homelessness and encampment relocation programs. While it is indeed vital for vulnerable households to receive supports for stable housing, prioritization in the context of neoliberalization takes on distinctly austerity-serving and residualizing functions, whereby the “most” vulnerable remain recipients of declining public resources while others are deprioritized despite also being in critical need (Hackworth, 2009; Ali et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2023). Moreover, which groups are prioritized can and has changed over time, indicating that more households could be deprioritized in Manitoba as neoliberalization continues and priorities change based on political or other factors.

Resistance

While the case study shows that neoliberalization has eroded social housing in Manitoba, it also demonstrates several conditions that may have helped temper such erosion. First, the governing political party has a role in shaping how neoliberalism is implemented (Olsen, 2011; Hicks & Esping-Andersen, 2005); though Manitoba did adopt more neoliberal approaches over time under both the PC and NDP parties, this appears to have been moderated somewhat during NDP terms relative to periods when the PC party was leading government.

Second, organized and strategic advocacy are also associated with effective opportunities to resist or at least temper neoliberalization (Manza, Brooks, and Sauder, 2005; Clapham, 2018). In Manitoba, particularly in the late 2000s and again in the early 2020s, the sustained efforts of several coordinated organizations including the Right to Housing Coalition, Make Poverty History Manitoba, the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, and the CCPA-MB appear to have played a significant role in prompting the province to set and attain targets for new RGI production (Brandon, 2016; Cooper, Hajer, & Plaut, 2020; Brownlee & MacKinnon, 2018). Moreover, the inclusion of policy analysts, researchers, housing providers, and people with lived experience in these organizations enabled them to collectively contribute diverse expertise (Brownlee & MacKinnon, 2018), and bolster their solidaristic and organizational resources to more effectively influence Manitoba's commitments to enhance social housing.

Recommendations

Arising from this research, the following recommendations should be pursued to reengage in the expansion of social housing and realize the housing rights of all Manitobans:

Poverty and housing need must be recognized as public issues resulting from specific and deliberate political, economic, and social policy decisions, rather than the individual failures that neoliberal narratives would have us believe they are.

1. The provincial and federal governments should commit public resources to both expand and maintain a social housing supply that sufficiently meets all low-income housing need. Policy-makers and the public need to acknowledge the value of keeping social housing a social endeavor, and all levels of government, but especially the federal level with the most fiscal authority and resources, need to fully commit to supporting permanent public and nonprofit social housing.
2. Both the provincial and federal governments need to support the nonprofit sector with long-term, stable, and appropriate funding and programs. Current conditions challenge the capacity of providers, by increasing both the precarity of funding and the complexity of relationships with funders and tenants. For the social housing

sector to continue doing the crucial work that it has done for the past 70 years, it must be supported through appropriate and consistent funding, programming, and capacity development.

3. Policy-makers, civil society, researchers, and the public overall need to recognize how neoliberalization processes exacerbate social inequalities, and take steps to eliminate such processes and outcomes. Poverty and housing need must be recognized as public issues resulting from specific and deliberate political, economic, and social policy decisions, rather than the individual failures that neoliberal narratives would have us believe they are.

Conclusion

The goals of this study were to examine whether and how neoliberalism is reflected in the approaches to social housing that evolved in Manitoba over recent decades, and explore conditions that may have helped resist it. As demonstrated by this case study, neoliberalization has had significant impacts in Manitoba, eroding not only the social housing system, but also the involvement and capacities of both the province and nonprofit sector to provide it. Social housing is critical to the wellbeing of many Manitobans, especially in the context of increasing neoliberalism and its ensuing social inequality. Actions should be taken by all levels of government to stop this neoliberal trajectory, engage in the expansion of social housing, and realize the housing rights of all Canadians.

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About the author

Andrea McDougall is a social researcher and recent graduate of the University of Manitoba Master of Arts Program in Sociology. She completed this research as part of her MA thesis.

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Land Acknowledgement

Manitoba is located on the original lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Anisininew, Dakota, and Dene peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation on Treaty 1 Territory. Recognizing that past and ongoing housing inequalities are strongly tied to colonization and the dispossession of land for Indigenous Peoples in Manitoba, I acknowledge my responsibility to contribute solutions to the problems caused by past and present colonial policies in Canada, and am committed to contributing research that respects the spirit and intent of Treaties and supports the strengths of Indigenous communities.



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